

VZCZCXRO4994

PP RUEHAG RUEHBI RUEHCI RUEHLH RUEHPW RUEHROV

DE RUEHAA #0808/01 1791234

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 271234Z JUN 08

FM AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1064

INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 3952

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 1769

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 1636

RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 2205

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 0805

RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 2635

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000808

SIPDIS

STATE FOR R, SCA/CEN, SCA/PPD, DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/27/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM SOCI TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: RFE/RL NEWS COLLECTION PRACTICES
LEADS TO QUESTIONS ABOUT ACCURACY OF REPORTING

REF: A. ASHGABAT 0807

1B. 07 ASHGABAT 1117

Classified By: CDA Richard E. Hoagland: 1.4(B), (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: A Turkmenistan-based RFE/RL reporter told Poloff on June 26 that a June 23 RFE/RL story that he was uncertain where the report that hundreds of families were being forcibly resettled -- possibly due to their ethnicity -- to frontier outposts in an effort to populate new territories in northern Turkmenistan came from. According to the reporter, the story was likely the result of a caller who text messaged Radio Azatlyk, and was subsequently interviewed about the relocation story by someone in RFE/RL's Prague office. While there is a basis in fact -- Turkmenistan's authorities are enforcing a new law to widen border green zones -- RFE/RL's practice of broadcasting single-source reports from Turkmenistan led the news organization to take that kernel of truth and run with it -- with highly colored results. Recognizing the difficulties that Turkmenistan's environment presents to those wanting to employ normal good journalism practices, the fundamental disconnect between RFE/RL's news collection procedures and its policy of presenting those stories as accurate "news," without caveating the limitations of its sources, is hurting both RFE/RL's credibility, and post's ability to persuade Turkmenistan's officials that RFE/RL is a legitimate news organization whose personnel should be given respect and accreditation (see reftel A). END SUMMARY.

12. (U) RFE/RL broadcast a report June 23 alleging that hundreds of families in northern Turkmenistan's Dashoguz Province have been forced to leave their homes near the Turkmen-Uzbek border in a government effort to populate new territories in desert regions. According to the story, none of the families being relocated is receiving compensation, and only have been told vaguely that the law requires all territory within 500 meters of the Uzbek border to be cleared. The RFE/RL story strongly implied that the government might be targeting families forced to move because of their ethnicity.

POST SOURCES ONLY AWARE OF VOLUNTARY RESETTLEMENT PRACTICES

¶3. (C) Post checked with a number of local employees from Dashoguz and implementing organizations active in Dashoguz (please protect), all of whom told us they had not heard of any coordinated campaign of the nature that RFE/RL was reporting. Though one staff member believed that the story of relocations from a 500-meter border zone might have some basis in fact, he suggested that the overall story of mass relocations was probably exaggerated. Employees did speak of long-standing practices under which people can apply to the local government for a job/land. Because of a scarcity of new land in many villages, individuals can be (and frequently are) encouraged to go to new districts, like Ruhubelent, a district set up two years ago in southeastern Dashoguz. If they want to accept the offer of land or a job, then they would have to move to the new areas. This understanding is consistent with what an embassy officer learned during an October 2007 visit to Ruhubelent (reftel).

THE PROBLEMS WITH ONE-SOURCE REPORTING

¶4. (C) In an effort to get to the bottom of the story, Poloff met on June 26 with RFE/RL reporter Halmyrat Gylychdurdyev. Gylychdurdyev told Poloff that he had not posted the story and does not have contacts in Dashoguz. Gylychdurdyev suggested that RFE/RL had received the story from a listener. According to Gylychdurdyev, RFE/RL broadcasts as Radio Azatlyk six hours a day in the Turkmen language. In between segments, it runs an announcement urging listeners who have a story to report to call a local number and leave an SMS text message with their phone number.

ASHGABAT 00000808 002 OF 002

Prague-based Radio Azatlyk employees then call those who respond and ask them about their stories. If Radio Azatlyk employees decide the story is worthwhile, they write it up for broadcast without further confirmation. Gylychdurdyev acknowledged that this one-source style of reporting limits the articles' breadth and accuracy, noting that, if people are upset about something that happens to them, they often use the Radio Azatlyk route to vent. Likewise, Prague-based Radio Azatlyk personnel either do not ask the right questions, fail to ask all the questions that would provide verifying details, or make assumptions that are not always accurate, sometimes based on worst-case stereotypes of Turkmenistan.

¶5. (C) What Gylychdurdyev did know about the specifics of what is happening in Dashoguz is that former President Niyazov had decreed that the border should have a 300-meter wide, unpopulated buffer to facilitate security efforts. Under President Berdimuhamedov, the government issued an internal decree increasing the width of the border zone to 500 meters. Authorities now must enforce the new law, meaning that those within the 500-meter limit must move. Gylychdurdyev had no information to suggest that the policy was being implemented in an ethnically discriminatory fashion, although a large number of ethnic Uzbeks live in and around Dashoguz, and he believed that, at most, 80-90 families would be affected. Due to his lack of contacts in the province, Gylychdurdyev was unable to provide Poloff with additional details, including whether those affected would receive compensation or alternative housing.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: We will continue to pursue the Dashoguz story, but it appears at this point as if the story is, at the least, highly exaggerated. But this case raises larger questions about the way RFE/RL and other sources of "news" on Turkmenistan -- including most of the exile opposition websites -- operate. While recognizing the difficulties that Turkmenistan's environment presents to those wanting to use normal good journalism practices, we believe that there is a fundamental disconnect between RFE/RL's news collection methodology and its policy of presenting those stories as accurate "news" without caveating the limitations of its sources. The result is that, although many of RFE/RL's stories have an element of truth, the overall presentation

can be biased and off-base. If someone has an ax to grind, it is the perfect vehicle for launching an anonymous attack. It is precisely these problems that over time impacts both RFE/RL's credibility and post's ability to persuade Turkmenistan's officials that RFE/RL is a legitimate news organization whose personnel should be given accreditation.

END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND